

Digital Point and Shoot

Matching digital cameras and housings

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One of the most difficult problems in the new world of underwater digital photography is terminology overload. Although the camera functions are similar, there are tons of new terms and concepts to be digested. This gets so confusing that new underwater photographers often get discouraged.

In some ways underwater photography with film cameras was easier — they were either amphibious or required a housing. There were many camera models that offered the diver a chance to point, shoot and capture the moment. The problem was that since most cameras did not have through-the-lens viewing, images were often not what you saw through the viewfinder. This is why aspiring underwater photographers were drawn to the housed single-lens reflex cameras.

Then digital cameras took the plunge and changed things. For example, all digital cameras allow direct viewing through the lens via the LCD monitor. Even the most basic point-and-shoot models offer this feature. The other difference is that there are no amphibious digital cameras to date, so all underwater digital cameras are housed.

With film systems, you bought the camera and if it wasn't amphibious, you then

looked for a housing. There were lots of camera and housing manufacturers, so you had plenty of choices. You could find something to satisfy every requirement and price range.

Underwater digital photography is a bit different, much like the chicken and egg concept. Finding a good digital camera is not a problem as there are hundreds on the market.

On the other hand, housing manufacturers have been leery of taking the plunge. It seems that as soon as they build a camera housing, a new camera model is released. Consequently, there are now relatively few housings available, but more and more are being introduced. The ideal solution is first to look at which housings are available, and then to select the appropriate camera to match the housing.

The largest group of underwater digital housings are those made for digital cameras that closely resemble their point-and-shoot film counterparts. These are more economically priced and are fairly easy to conquer. Some of the camera names you will hear in this group are Nikon Coolpix, Olympus Camedia, Canon Powershot and Fuji FinePix.

Another thing to consider before you buy is image resolution. Digital camera resolution ranges from one to 12 megapixels,

which results in three- to 36-megabyte files. Of course, the camera price increases with the resolution, so most of the newer digital cameras on the market today are in the two- to three-megapixel range.

How much resolution do you need? That depends on how you plan to use the photos. Research shows that with film cameras, 97 percent of the images taken by amateurs are never enlarged above 4 by 6 inches in size. Since the bulk of underwater photographers fit in this group, most of the two- to three-megapixel digital cameras would easily fit their needs.

We have seen some of the two- to three-megapixel cameras produce excellent prints up to 8 by 10 inches in size. You can even make prints up to 11 by 14 inches with enhancement software with excellent results. If you plan on enlarging your images to 11 by 14 and above, you should consider a camera in the three- to five-megapixel range to be satisfied with your images.

One last consideration to think about before buying is the housing itself. Underwater housings are generally made of a solid metal alloy or clear polycarbonate. The metal housing usually fits around the camera snugly like a glove, and is almost indestructible. The clear polycarbonate housing typically is more fragile, but gives you a clear view of all the camera controls, functions and modes. We have tried both, and see advantages to both, so it really comes down to personal preference.

OK, so now that we have spurred your interest in purchasing a digital camera, you probably have plenty of questions. Who makes what housing? Which camera should you buy? How much will it cost?

Since the camera and housing market changes so rapidly with this changing technology, it is really tough to stay on top of what's new. We have compiled a list of just some of the housing offerings at press time. Best bet is to log on to the Web, because the manufacturers are good about providing the most current pricing and availability on their sites.

Digital Options



AMPHIBICO



AQUATICA



EWA MARINE



IKELITE



LIGHT & MOTION



SEALIFE



SEA & SEA



SUBAL



UK GERMANY

Amphibico www.amphibico.com

Amphibico, known for its quality aluminum video camera housings, has just introduced its first housing for a digital still camera. The Surveyor 707 housing is designed to maximize the electronic and manual controls of the Sony SDC-F707 camera.

Aquatica www.aquatica.ca

Aquatica has a cast aluminum housing for the Nikon Coolpix 995. All the camera functions are accessible and the monitor is positioned at a 45-degree viewing angle.

Ewa Marine www.rtsphoto.com

Ewa Marine offers flexible housings made from thick, two-ply PVC for underwater applications and all-weather protection. Ewa has housings for most of the Nikon Coolpix, Canon, Olympus, Sony, Fuji and Kodak compact digital cameras.

Ikelite www.ikelite.com

Ikelite is world renowned for its polycarbonate housings and their ability to house most any

camera. They feature both stock and custom housings. Here's a brief list: Nikon Coolpix, 5000, 995, 990 and 995, Olympus 4040, 3040, 3030, 2040 and D360, Canon S100, G1 and Digital Elph, Kodak DX3900, 4900, DC220 and 290, and Sony Mavica FD7, 71, 73, 88, 91, 97, DSC-F707, DSC-S75 and S85.

Light & Motion www.uwimaging.com

Light & Motion is one of the companies that started housing digital cameras for underwater photography, with their Tetra. The Tetra works with the Olympus Camedia 3020, 3030 and 3040 cameras. Recently they have added the Titan, which is a digital SLR for the Olympus E-10 and E-20 cameras. Their latest offering is the Tetra 5000 for the Nikon Coolpix 5000 camera.

SeaLife www.sealife-cameras.com

SeaLife has expanded beyond the film camera marketplace with the introduction of the ReefMaster DC200 digital camera. It has been tested to 200 feet and features one-button operation. The instant delete allows you to edit your images

while underwater, to let you keep more good pictures. It is further expandable with ReefMaster lenses, flashes and accessories.

Sea & Sea www.seaandsea.com

Sea & Sea are distributors for Canon's WP-DC 200 waterproof case for the Powershot A40 and A20 cameras. They combine their digital camera package with the YS-25DX digital strobe and manual conversion lens adapter. They also feature conversion lens and macro lens adapters for Sony, Canon and Olympus housings.

Subal www.subalusa.com

Subal, known for its precision machining of aluminum housings, now offers the CP5 for the Nikon Coolpix 5000.

UK-Germany www.uk-germany.com

This European manufacturing company features a new digital camera housing for the Nikon Coolpix 5000 camera. Additional housings are available for the Nikon Coolpix 990 and Canon EOS D60 and D30 cameras.