

First Impressions

Nikon D300 and Ikelite Housing

By Dave Harasti

I have been using a Nikon D80 for the past 12 months and have been really happy with it. The results from the camera were more than satisfying and I couldn't complain... the D80 is a great camera.

But then Nikon went and announced the new D300 and with it they mentioned the new 'Liveview' feature – being the ability to take a photo using the LCD screen. Wow! No more searching for pygmy seahorses through the small viewfinder and developing neck arthritis as I'd contort my neck to look through the viewfinder. It would be just like using my old Coolpix 5000 again!

Finally I would be able to frame my shots using the rear LCD display. Like an excited schoolboy off to the lolly shop I knew that I had to own one; as Gollum said in Lord of the Rings 'My precious, it must be mine!'

D300 benefits

Thanks to Yuzo at uwdigitalcamera.com in Japan I was able to beat the waiting list in Australia for the D300 and had one just in time to play with for Christmas.

Some of the initial benefits that I have found of the D300 over the D80 include:

- D300 mp @ 12.3 compared to 10.1mp on the D80. Whilst its not much of a difference it will allow the images to be printed slightly larger

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- Increase number of focus points. You can use 51 focus points on the D300 if you really want to however in the camera menu I have changed it to just the 11 focus points – much easier to control underwater!
- The larger rear LCD display screen on the D300 (3 inch) is a huge improvement on the D80's LCD (2.5 inch). Reviewing the images underwater on this screen is fantastic and the size of this screen is a major positive.
- Battery life. I've read reviews saying you can take up to 1000 pics with a fully charged battery in the D300... I can't say that I have tested that but so far charging batteries for the D300 has not been necessary – it lasts for ever!
- The D300 takes compact flash card compared to the SD cards in the D80. Whilst the SD cards were handy as they fitted straight into my laptop I am forever losing them because of their small size. My dog even ate one once!

Its not often that you find a juvenile White's seahorse (Hippocampus whitei) and its even rarer to find one curled around an adult!



Ikelite housing



Ikelite as usual were one of the first manufacturers to have a housing available for the D300. I received my new housing just after Christmas and it's pretty much identical to the D80 housing. The Ikelite housing allows control of all the camera functions except with the exception of the 'metering selector' that surrounds the AE/AF button on the back of the housing (which isn't necessary underwater anyway). Similar to the D80 housing, it has the superb Ikelite iTTL conversion circuitry that operates with the Ikelite DS SubStrobes.

The large dial on the back of the housing makes it ever so easy to adjust the strobe flash output either through TTL or in seven manual power settings. The iTTL strobe control on the back is one of the reasons why I love the Ikelite housings, and the obvious fact that you can see into the housing to make sure it's not flooding!

At this stage, I've only had a chance to test the system out underwater using the Nikon 60mm lens



This orange anglerfish (note: they should be called anglerfish, not frogfish) is using his fishing rod and lure to capture a prey.

and have taken it for 3 dives at my local divesite, the Pipeline in Nelson Bay – NSW – Australia). During these dives I have experimented with the new 'Liveview' function, which unfortunately does not appear to be as useful as I thought it would be.

Liveview

I was an avid supporter of the Coolpix 5000 and 8400 and I swore I'd never buy a DSLR because I liked being able to use the rear display for framing images. However, after spending the past 2 years shooting a D70s and a D80 I've realised it's not all that difficult to use a viewfinder underwater. When the D300 was launched with liveview I thought it would be like shooting with my Coolpix all over again, hence I chose to upgrade from the D80.



The eastern gobbie is a member of the Cardinalfish family which are unique in that the male broods the eggs in his mouth... this fish had a decent mouthful!

To activate liveview you turn the mode dial to 'Lv'. When you press the shutter button, the mirror raises and the view through the lens will be displayed in the camera monitor instead of the viewfinder. To auto focus, you half depress the shutter and then the mirror will drop and the display screen goes blank, therefore you can't see the camera actual focusing on the subject. Live view is restored when the shutter is released and the subject should 'hopefully' be in focus. Finally, to finish the process press the shutter button completely down to take the shot.

My initial impressions of using liveview underwater is that it doesn't work that well and is a very slow painful process. When you are focusing on the subject the screen goes blank to focus, unfortunately you have no idea if the fish is still in the frame or if your subject has turned



Given that anglerfish like to feed on seahorses, these two (look closely!) babies are playing Russian Roulette!

the other way. Most of my seahorse pics with liveview had the nose out of focus or the eye looking the other way! It is the equivalent to basically having a long shutter lag on a dSLR, this is obviously not a good thing! Some of the shots that I have taken with Liveview (such as Mr No Nose Seahorse) have turned out okay but lots of the others have been out of focus. Maybe with more practise I'll get better but at this stage using liveview underwater gets the thumbs down.

One feature that I don't like of the D300 is that it doesn't display the current focus point position in the top LCD panel. On the D80 you could just look on top of the camera to see the current position of the focus point; it appears the D300 does not have this function unless there is a magical button in the menu system that I have

overlooked!

I'm off to Sulawesi for 2 weeks in mid March where I will really test the D300 out through a full range of lenses. I'm looking forward to finding a pygmy seahorse so I can really test the Liveview on the rear LCD and see if it's suitable for these tiny animals. Even if it's not successful I'll still be happy to look through the small viewfinder, I've been managing to cope okay with it for the past 2 years!

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