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Aquatica AD90 Housing For The Nikon D90

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by [Tim Rock](#)

I'm sure many of you reacted as I did when the Nikon D90 was first announced as the first DSLR with HD video. Being an old TV news guy, I thought the opportunity to play with HD on a still camera was a real bonus. Plus, this camera had a lot of bang for the buck.

The sensor in the D90 is about as good as it gets for this class of camera. It is small and a bit light, but with a power grip it adds just enough weight and bulk and feels really good above the water. I've used it on assignments and the large, high quality LCD screen gives you the ability to tell at a glance if you have a nice shot. So when the housing arrived from Aquatica, I was happy to see it was also small, compact and light. The housing has a shiny, spackled black finish and looks pretty cool.

Aquatica AD90 Housing

The camera fits the housing like a glove and virtually every function is accessible underwater. That means roughly 40 buttons, knobs, bulkheads and other appendages poke out from the housing body. Like most cameras nowadays, you don't need 80% of the functions available. But it's nice to know, should a situation present itself and you have sufficiently memorized the manual, you can do just about anything you want while cavorting with the turtles and fishes. There's even a video editing function so you can kill deco time by working on your show.

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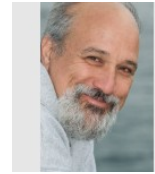
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Aquatica AD90 Housing For The Nikon D90



Richard Salas
Photographer

I have been a studio photographer for the last 30 years and started underwater photography about 6 years ago. I love the usual suspects shot with beautiful lighting. Haven't won any awards or been published worldwide but...

All of the existing Aquatica ports work on this housing, and as always, be sure to reference the lens port and gear chart in the manual to ensure you are using the proper port for your lens of choice. My favorite lens is the Tokina 10-17mm wide angle zoom lens. Even though the port chart suggests a modest extension ring, using the 8" dome without an extension will produce sharp images. The macro shots and fish in this review were shot with a Sigma 50mm Macro lens – another of my favorites, as I can shoot anything from shark and diver portraits all way down to Christmas tree worms and pygmy seahorses. There is a new port lock ("port release mechanism") on the AD90 housing, allowing the port to click into place.



The quick release tray is small and allows you to change batteries without taking the tray off the camera. You still have to take it out of the housing, but that's a snap as it goes in and out on two posts so the camera always stays perfectly in place. The hotshoe wire is also longer so you can quickly change cards and batteries by just sliding the tray out a bit with the hotshoe still connected - do your work and slide it back in. I shoot everything in Manual mode but this camera does have iTTL capabilities. This is really good news for macro enthusiasts who like to use this setting. It is usually quite good for close-up exposures, but wide angle can let in a bit more light and fool the camera sometimes. Many macro guys swear by iTTL. So now if you want it, you got it.



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Shooting Stills

My first series of shots along the South Airport reefs at Tubbataha were a bit of a surprise. They seemed overexposed. Then I remembered the default ISO for this camera is 200. I was used to shooting at ISO100 in virtually every other DSLR I had ever used. So this meant faster shutter speeds and higher F-stops. There is a way to get around this using the Lo-1 setting, which can make highlights more critical. But, this setting also has greater dynamic range (a very good thing) and less noise than ISO 200. Basically, the lower the ISO setting, the lower the noise and the higher the dynamic range. This is because below the lowest numbered ISO, the raw data is shifted toward the right; so there is an increased possibility of clipping highlights. But the color and overall photo is strong and vibrant. But I decided to use the default ISO 200 most of the time and am getting used to the greater depth-of-field and other pluses that using more light can bring. It especially helps with fast moving objects like dolphins where you can crank up the shutter speed for natural light.





The compact housing allows you to get into smaller spaces and close for close focus wide angle (CFWA) shots. With strobes attached, the weight is still fine. Bigger housings can give you photographer arm (or neck) at the end of the dive. But the fatigue factor is low with the D90.

So how about the video?

Well, quite frankly, Nikon didn't design this aspect very well. Even when you thumb through the D90 manual, you'll be hard pressed to find out much about this popular and groundbreaking DSLR function. At this writing, the Nikon D300s was just announced, with a much better system and Canon's higher end EOS 5D Mark II has been the shining star in this arena. But for us beer and burger guys, hey, it is HD. The video doesn't really chew up as much memory card space as you'd think. The video quality looks pretty good and sounds fine (its mono). Nikon does make you jump through a few hoops as far as focus goes, but it doesn't take too long to get used to it and go right from shooting stills into video mode with a couple of quick button pushes. The housing is ergonomic enough so this can all be done with your right thumb. And if the action is fast and furious and would make a great still image, you can shoot stills right in the middle of video recording.

Recording video requires enabling the Live View setting, but this feature can actually help in still composition as well. Hand holding this little housing and keeping a nice steady shot while swimming isn't so bad. Shooting a wide video shot is pretty easy if you keep yourself weighted down and your elbows tucked into your chest. For viewing, in shallower water you could use some sort of lens hood, especially with a strong sun at your back. But down past 20 feet, there's not much of a problem. Colorwise, a Magic Filter is helpful if video is the main goal of the dive. Of course, you could also add video lights to the equation but you'd have to turn them on and off manually.

For macro video, the D90 focusing represents a real challenge. For really small stuff, you have to pre-focus and then change to video mode. The camera then retains that focus and depth-of-field. So to really have a frustrating dive, I shot video of really small or really active marine life in Guam's Tumon Bay Marine Preserve with a flat port and a Sigma 50mm macro lens. I quickly found that a small, weighted tripod would have helped me greatly! Even holding the housing against the sand showed a bit of sway. I was able to manage enough shots for cutaway length images (a good 2-3 seconds). But longer macro video sequences require a bit of planning. I also tried carrying a clip-on 2-pound weight and this did help quite a bit with handheld video macro and close-ups. But a sacrificial tripod would be needed for any sort of real production.



In my short diving experience with this unit, I can conclude that the D90 is best used as a still camera with the video capabilities as a bonus if the situation presents itself.

In all, I've really been having fun with this camera and housing, which is what it's all about. The Aquatica housing is light, rugged, and of professional quality. This rig will open new horizons for the creative demons in you waiting to explode on the silver screen... er, RGB monitor.

Successful innovations by Nikon and Aquatica make this combination a great little tool for the amateur and pro.

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