CAMERA HOUSING
FANTASEA **FP7000**

HOWARD ROSENSTEIN of Fantasea Line was an early Red Sea pioneer credited with discovering the wreck of the *Dunraven*. Now back home in Israel, he runs a company making camera housing and accessories. It is named after his last dive-safari boat, *Fantasea II*. (That's now called *Pelagian* and is alive and well operating in Wakatobi, Indonesia.)

Fantasea Line specialises in making underwater housings for compact cameras, mainly the Nikon Coolpix range.

Coolpix P7000

When compared with the latest generation of compact cameras coming from other manufacturers, the high-end compact Nikon Coolpix P7000 is a bit of a brick.

It seems even bigger than my Canon G-series compact, which has been criticised for the same reason, and it's a lot bigger than the now-popular Canon S95.

However, in common with the Canon G, it looks like a proper camera. It has knobs and dials, and far fewer of the controls are hidden deep inside a menu system.

It gives a photographic dinosaur like me much more confidence in thinking I know how to get the best out of it.

This proved important, because it appeared that when Howard sent it to me with the Fantasea FP7000 underwater housing, he omitted to include the instruction manual.

The first thing I confirmed was that it shot RAW files as well as a range of various-quality jpegs (and combinations of the two).

As Kurt Amsler, one of the most experienced and successful underwater photographers in the world, once told me: "If you don't shoot RAW files, you're missing the whole point of digital photography."

RAW files allow you to go back and adjust everything apart from focus and the choice of subject on your home computer, long after that moment under water when you pressed the button.

Fantasea FP7000

Because the camera is larger than some other compacts, the FP7000 housing is necessarily larger too, and because the camera has all those knobs and dials, the housing has to be equipped with more complex controls than simply a few buttons to access a menu.

I was bemused when an English gentleman abroad recently described a problem with his housing as "taking water". Others might have described the incident as a disastrous flood that made their camera toast.

The FP7000 housing is levered open via a locking cam knob at the side. The lock needs an opposite and opposing action to the knob.

Double O-rings protect it from leaks, which means that it takes quite a squeeze to open or shut it after the camera drops in snugly.

One top command dial control needs to be lifted to allow you to do this easily, and I noted that there is an internal matt-black rubber shroud that fits around the extending lens to prevent internal reflections on the front glass.

There are three other command dials. These are linked to rubber-covered wheels that engage precisely with the rotating dials of the camera when you hinge the housing's back closed. It is also a good idea to line up the markings on the outer dials with those on the camera, although this is not essential, because all is revealed on the camera's LCD as you operate them.

I did find that dropping the camera into the housing was a bit too seductively easy, and on more than one occasion the bottom button that operated the main command dial made no contact, so I was careful to make sure that this worked before committing myself to the water.

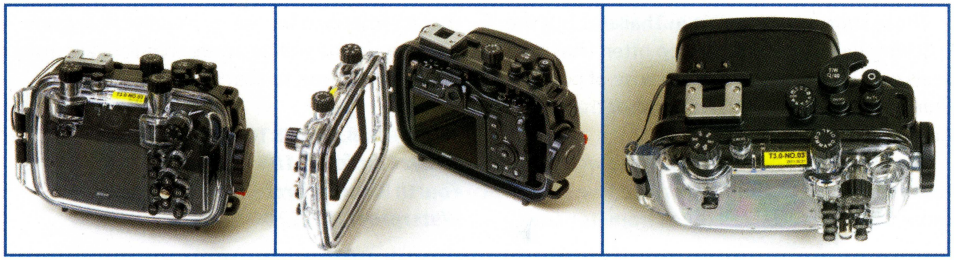
I never discovered why this happened, but quickly reinstalling the camera if it didn't work first time seemed to fix the problem.

Among all the controls available on the housing is a big zoom control, but I

SPECS

NIKON COOLPIX P7000 CAMERA
PRICE ▸▸ **Around £350**
SENSOR ▸▸ **10MP CCD**
SENSITIVITY ▸▸ **ISO 100-6400**
LENS ▸▸ **28-200mm (equivalent) stabilised**
MODES ▸▸ **P, A, S, M plus 3 custom modes**
VIDEO ▸▸ **720p mode**
FOCUS ▸▸ **Continuous AF / zoom possible in video mode.**
RECORDING MEDIA ▸▸ **SDHC**

FANTASEA FP7000 HOUSING
PRICE ▸▸ **£599 from Digital Distribution.**
DEPTH ▸▸ **60m**
CAMERA CONTROLS ▸▸ **All**
CONTACT ▸▸ **www.nikonhousings.com, www.fantasea.com**
DIVER GUIDE ★★★★★★★★★★



recommend that you stick with the lens at the widest position and use your fins to zoom closer physically instead.

That way, you always have the minimum amount of water through which to shoot.

Haven't plastics come a long way in 50 years? They're even making the latest US-built airliners out of the stuff now.

I noted that although this housing's door is made from a heavyweight clear Perspex with black plastic fittings, everything felt precise and high-quality. The front half is matt-black plastic, and feels equally solid and nicely engineered.

A lot of you may have looked at this housing and dismissed it because at first glance its front glass appears not to accept a wide-angle lens.

But, of course, Fantasea has thought of this, and the FP7000 accepts the company's own range of Big Eye ancillary lenses, which are designed specifically for it. Similarly, it has an accessory shoe and a standard tripod bush that allow it to take almost any flashgun mounted.

There is a facility to connect two fibre-optic cables to synch off-board flashguns with the camera's inboard flash, and should you wish to rely on that flash alone to light your subject, the connection board slides out to reveal it.

There is even a button that allows you to pop up the inboard flash should you forget, but you can't pop it down again once the camera is enclosed in the housing.

Conclusions

The FP7000 is certainly tough. I received a copy of an email from the boys at Nikon Professional Services, who were recording some extreme kayaking.

They ran a 25m wall descent and got some nice results, while a housing of another make, used for a similar drop, got broken.

This toughness goes along with a certain amount of meatiness – the FP7000 is a bit of a brute.

The camera itself seems to have the minimum delay between pressing the button and getting the picture, which should help to avoid those pictures of fish rapidly leaving the frame.

It is designed to take pictures in very low light levels without that annoying digital noise, and offers several different user-presets to which you can switch at a moment's notice.

It also offers white-balance bracketing to help you get those underwater colours spot on if you are shooting only jpeg files.

Should you opt for the camera, I suggest that this tough and shockproof Fantasea FP7000 underwater housing will not disappoint. ■

COMPARABLE CAMERA/HOUSINGS TO CONSIDER:

Canon G12 with Canon Housing, £650
Canon S95 with Canon Housing, £550
Sea & Sea DX-GE5 (housing inc.), £475