
A Dome of Your Own

Using a standard wide-angle lens on your Nikonos under water

Once you've shot a few rolls of film on a Nikonos with the standard 35-mm lens, the lust for wider-angle coverage sets in with a vengeance. Wider than a 28-mm can produce, wider than a 20-mm — what you need is a 15-mm wide-angle lens! No problem; Nikon makes just such a lens.

Well, small problem: You'd have to part with \$2,000. It's this small problem that makes the Aqualens, at half the price, appealing.

Aqualens, made by Aqua Vision Systems, makers of Aquatica housings, is essentially a dome port that fits over the lens of a Nikonos (the V or earlier, not the RS), allowing you to use an ordinary Nikon surface lens under water. The original was designed to accommodate only Nikon-mount lenses from 14 to 24 mm; now there are versions that fit over Canon, Pentax, Minolta, and Olympus lenses. As long as the lens can focus at 12 inches, you can use it.

If this worked the way Aqua Vision claimed, an inexpensive wide-angle lens could be used not

only under water but also for surface photography (the dome port doesn't affect in-air focusing) and for over/under shots.

Aqua Vision's standard dome port is a 6-inch, optical-grade acrylic port mounted on a marine-grade aluminum body with controls for aperture and focus.

Sounds Great, Does It Work?

On a recent dive trip I put the Aqualens to the test. To compare photo quality, I shot pictures with the Aqualens and with the same lens in a housed system. No problems here; Aqualens shots were indistinguishable from photos taken using the housed system.

The Aqualens does have its drawbacks, though, as I found out. None of these are damning, but they are of concern:

■ You can't secure a camera lens to the Aqualens the way you can to a camera. Twice my use of the aperture control caused the lens to work loose during a dive. If you know this is happening, you can crank the lens back down into

position with the aperture adjustment, but I was surprised by it the first time, and the lens fell off inside the dome port (of course, this happened when the dolphins were cavorting with the whale sharks). The Aqualens needs a locking mechanism.

■ The registration pin assembly, which mounts on the top of the Nikonos to secure the lens, is too short and not well attached to the camera shoe (mine's now in 300 feet of water off the Solomon Islands). I'll tie the next one on with fishing line.

■ The outside rings that tell you the aperture and focus settings can rotate out of calibration. Since you cannot read the lens settings while it's in the Aqualens, you'll be shooting with the wrong settings if it does get out of sync.

■ Changing lenses in the Aqualens is neither easy nor quick. There's very little room to get your fingers in. I would not count on doing this in a rocking boat between dives.

■ You really need the dome shade, if for nothing else, to protect the port itself. But with this on, the neoprene cover they sell will not stay on the port (I used rubber bands to secure partial coverage on land for this).

Bottom Line

With all that said, I still like the system. It gives coverage equivalent to or greater than the 15-mm Nikonos, with added versatility for over/under and surface shots. I should point out, however, that a surface lens in a dome port will never give you images

X-Rayted

The National Association of Photographic Manufacturers says you don't have to worry about passing your film through airport X-ray machines. They tested 35-mm slide and color and black-and-white negative film by passing them through modern security systems as many as 100 times with no ill effects. Only the fastest films (ISO 1600) showed any effects, and these were minor, "detectable only in demanding scenes examined by discriminating viewers."

Could it be that the key words are "modern security systems"? I think I'll still pass my film around all non-U.S. X-rays.

J. Q.

quite as crisp as the 15-mm Nikonos lens, which was designed from the start for underwater use. But you may need a microscope to see the difference.

Price is a big consideration. Aqualens lists for \$675, plus \$180 for aperture and focusing gears,

plus \$125 for a shade; in all, \$980, or about half the cost of the Nikonos 15-mm lens. True, if you don't already own one for your land camera you'll still have to buy a lens, but Vivitar and others sell 19-mm lenses for as little as \$100. At those prices you can even afford to carry a backup lens.

Aqualens is distributed in the U.S. by Bogen Photo Corporation and is available at Helix (800-621-6471), AB Sea Photo, and other places. Daymen Photo Marketing (416-298-9644) is the distributor in Canada.

W. D.

Farewell to Sipadan?

Many ways to screw up one good thing

In July 1991 when *In Depth* first visited Borneo Divers, one of only two resorts on a very small island off the coast of Malaysian Borneo, we called it the best shore diving and best night diving in the world. Since then, favorable reports have continued, but lately with a bit of grumbling: "It's getting too crowded."

Borneo Divers, one of two original operations, expanded its Sipadan Diving Lodge to accommodate 50 divers. A third resort sprang up, and another, built on a neighboring island, sends its boats over to dive Sipadan. Helicopters whisk still more divers out from the mainland.

Too crowded? *In Depth* readers diving Sipadan in 1994 and 1995 still rated the diving 4½ stars. However, two more unauthorized resorts are now trying to start up on the island. An East Malaysian newspaper reports that the Sabah government took chain saws to the guest houses built by the new operator, Sipadan Lodge. An *In Depth* correspondent at the Asian dive show was told that island rangers have torn down new construction several times, but it keeps getting rebuilt.

The number of turtles in the waters around Sipadan is one its

greatest attractions. Some observers say, however, that overpopulation of the island has reduced the number of nesting green sea turtles from 100 per night to only 20.

There have been changes recently in the government in Sabah. The new Interior Minister is said to be more concerned about the oil riches of Spratly Island than the turtles of tiny

Every year or so I build up enough frequent-flyer miles to earn a trip. It feels good to fly free. Here's a couple of easy ways to increase your mileage: telephone and credit card companies.

MCI is offering a deal: If you average \$25 a month on basic long-distance service in one year, you'll earn 11,500 miles toward a frequent-flyer program — American, Continental, Northwest, or Southwest Airlines. You also get, for the first 12 months, 1,000 more bonus miles for each month your bill tops \$25. On top of that, MCI gives you an additional five frequent-flyer miles for every dollar you spend on long distance. You could rack up 25,000 frequent-flyer miles in a year if you made your \$25 worth of long distance calls each month. Call 800-FLY-FREE.

AT&T has a True Rewards Program that gives you five miles for every dollar when your monthly bill is over \$25. Miles can be used on British Airways, Delta, United, and USAir. Call 800-773-9273.

American Express also has a frequent-flyer program. Membership Miles costs \$25 a year, but for every dollar you charge on your American Express card you get one frequent-flyer mile. Miles are accrued in the program and can be exchanged for miles from Delta, USAir, Continental, Southwest, Aeromexico, and Mexicana when needed. Call American Express at 800-327-2177.

Diner's Club Card has a similar program matching dollars for miles, which can be applied to any of the major airlines' frequent-flyer programs. Call 800-234-6377.

Citibank Advantage Mastercard offers one mile on American Airlines' frequent-flyer program for each dollar charged. Call 800-359-4444.

I charge gas, cable TV, furniture, meals out, even groceries. If the car craters and I have to spend \$1,000 on repairs, no sweat — I'm 1,000 miles closer to Palau.

Dialing Your Way to Palau