

Tales of Leaky Camera Housings, Sulking And Always Ultra!



I AM OF the opinion that I hold the current world speed record for aborting a dive and getting back onto the dive boat. A truly amazing feat that was witnessed by the editor of this publication and the proprietor of the Los Gigantes Dive Centre in Tenerife and was inspired by the sea water which I could see trickling into my clear plastic camera housing.

This incident occurred some time ago in the days of film when camera electronics were limited to an in-built exposure meter. A quick wipe of the camera base followed by a tickle of warm air from a hair drier had the camera ready to run again. The housing received similar treatment as well as an 'o' ring replacement and was tested (empty) by weighting it and lowering it into the water at the Los Gigantes marina for five minutes. That afternoon I was back in business racking up Kodak's profits with another 36 exposure dive.

Now let's move into another century, Kodak no longer cut a swathe through my income instead I have opted to give a lump sum to Nikon for the honour of using their wonderful, but hideously expensive digital camera equipment, and I must not forget Subal who know how to make excellent but equally expensive camera housings.

So what other changes has time inflicted? Well it is pretty well impossible to see water trickling into an alloy housing, fortunately however my housing comes with its own built in leak detector. If the incident outlined above were to recur I believe that in identical circumstances I could save the camera but only because of the electronic leak detector which is extremely sensitive and would set off a bright LED warning indicator in the event of water ingress.

Before going any further I would like to bring to your attention the use of the word flood when applied to camera housings. To me a flood occurs following the catastrophic failure of a housing seal and usually occurs as a result of poor maintenance or because of error during pre-dive housing assembly. If a flood occurs during a dive you will be carrying around an aquarium occupied by some very sophisticated but terminally ill technology. Your options include sulking quietly while you complete the dive or heading to the surface in a controlled manner where a number of other options become available, all include sulking.

Personally I would be tempted to chuck the technology in the nearest bin (omit this step if you believe that your insurers will cough up for a new camera) rinse the housing in fresh water, dry it and then seek solace at the nearest bar. In essence a leak will not necessarily lead to camera write off given early warning and a prompt response. An undetected leak could lead to an expensive repair and in the worst case a flood.

So do you need a leak detector when your camera is in a clear plastic housing? The answer really depends on how much value you place on the contents of the housing. This is not just a money thing, consider a camera write-off with no available replacement at the start of a diving holiday. For some people this would not be an issue, personally I always dive with a camera and would become quite difficult to live with for the remainder of the trip, chronic sulking comes to mind. The crux of the problem is that a minimal amount of salt water in the wrong place will destroy the electronics in a modern camera and you may not detect this visually.

The time to check for leaks is immediately after you have entered the water preferably before you commence a descent or within the first few metres of descent. Unfortunately this is a busy time when you may have to address a number of issues other than your camera and in tidal conditions you may not have any time to linger at the surface. This is when a leak detector will justify itself, by giving you a very obvious visual indication that something is wrong. In response you can immediately abort the dive without the worry of controlled ascents and deco stops. Your buddy may be sulking at a missed diving opportunity but hopefully you have saved your expensive camera.

If a leak is detected during a dive then it is essential that you carry out a controlled ascent appropriate to the depth and duration of the dive, your health and that of your buddy must not be put on the line for the benefit of a camera. Obviously this scenario carries a greater risk of camera write off.

In all cases when a leak is detected you should switch off the camera and any attached flash units. Assuming that you have not had a total flood you should if possible hold the housing in such a way

that any water build up is isolated from the camera.

When you are back on your dive boat or on shore you should immediately drain the housing again trying to avoid water contact with the camera. After taking the camera out of its housing quickly dry it externally and immediately remove any batteries. Remove your memory card and open any user accessible compartments to check for water ingress.

At this point you must make a decision as to the wisdom of bringing the camera back into use. A few spots of water externally should not be a problem. Water inside the camera body may need professional attention, the decision is yours. If you do decide to carry on using the camera do not put it back into the housing until you have located and repaired the leak and most importantly test the repair by taking the empty housing for a dive and then rechecking for leaks.

All leak detectors work by sensing increased electric current between two terminals in the presence of moisture. The electronics involved along with a battery require space within the housing. Manufacturers often include them as an option in their SLR housings but in most cases detectors are not provided and where compact cameras have a snug fit in a compact housing it may not be possible to accommodate a detector.

If you wish to fit a leak detector retrospectively then the units made by Australian underwater photographer Jeff Mullins are probably the best option. He has developed a leak detector which he can customise to fit into a wide range of housings. On request he will advise whether his unit will fit your housing. The cost of the unit is US\$70 including post and packing. For further information go to: www.uwleakdetector.com.

Finally it would be very wrong to conclude this article without highlighting the contribution that a ladies sanitary pad could make to saving your camera in the event of a leak. The science is fairly straightforward and is based on the phenomenal amount of liquid that the pads can retain. Basically if the water is in the towel then it cannot be slopping around trashing your camera! Check out www.uwleakdetector.com/Pads.htm for installation details.