FUJIFILM FINEPIX F100FD CAMERA, WP-FXF100 HOUSING AND UW-120N STROBE

£329.99 (INCLUDING 1GB MEMORY CARD)

WHEN WE tested the Fujifilm Finepix F50 in the April 2008 issue, we reported that it was a good system but had a few shortcomings – namely, that it really required a supplementary lens, and that its focusing was a bit hit-and-miss. Here, we test the F50's bigger brother, the F100fd, to see if it addresses some of these issues.

I'll be succinct with its specifications, as it's what it can do that is of greater importance. Zillions of pixels – 12 million to be precise – are all very well, but it's how they recreate the image that matters. The 28mm wide-angle lens is good, as is the claimed improvement in the dynamic range (the amount of brightness and darkness the camera can detect), but the new RP (real photo) processor is what could make this camera really useful underwater. What this chip is meant to do is drastically reduce noise, giving crisper and clearer images in low-light situations such as those found underwater. The F100fd has a few other goodies such as the faster face-detection system, but this isn't really relevant for snapping aquatic critters.

'THE CHIP IS MEANT TO DRASTICALLY REDUCE NOISE, GIVING CLEARER IMAGES IN LOW-LIGHT'

I chose to use the camera straight out of the box, as I think this is what the majority of divers are looking for – the only addition, of course, being the housing and a small external strobe, both also manufactured by Fujifilm. Everything was set to auto, with the exception of the internal flash, which was switched to always fire – this was crucial, as the external slave strobe requires the internal flash to trigger it.

The dive site for the test was the wreck of the Alice Marie at a depth of 23m in Mounts Bay, Cornwall; the visibility was around 6m. To illustrate how the camera system performed, I've chosen six images that were all taken on this dive.

For mid-sized critters [image 1], the F100fd produced some stunning images. This picture of a plumose anemone is delightfully lit and has a nicely exposed background, giving a true-to-life green colour and subtle tones in the foreground.

Moving on to testing the camera's focusing capability, it easily passed the second test [2] of focusing on a difficult subject, the delicate dead man's fingers.

For the third image [3], I switched the camera's setting to macro mode, and the image of the jewel anemones is exceptional for a point-and-shoot camera. The F100fd automatically decreased the ISO to a low value, which resulted in a sharp and well-saturated photograph.

Out on the sand in brighter conditions, the camera just about produced a credible photograph [4] of a topknot. The strobe could have been a little more powerful, which would have added more colour.

Moving close in again, the picture of the edible crab [5] is about the best you can achieve in dark conditions with only a single strobe – ideally, a second light would have balanced the images – but the detail is excellent, especially on the all-important eye.

Finally, taking pictures of fish can be a haphazard affair with non-single-lens reflex (SLR) cameras due to the delay, but the F100fd fared pretty well – especially if you depress the shutter halfway and pan the subject, such as this pollack [6]. There is a little backscatter, but the detail on the fish itself is more than acceptable and, in clearer waters, would be a good shot.

To summarise, the images this camera produces are simply stunning and, with practice, your photographs would rival those of a mid-range digital SLR camera that costs several times as much. At just over £300 for the whole package, it's a steal.
CHARLES HOOD

DIVE SAYS...

A compact on a par with digital SLRs
Value 9
Performance 9

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