

Moving to Micro Four Thirds

by John Collins



Compass jellyfish and diver, Cuas Gorm, Old Head of Kinsale, Cork, Ireland.

Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II in Nauticam NA-EM1ii housing, Olympus M-Zuiko 8mm F1.8PRO lens, Zen Underwater 170mm Dome port, two x Retra Flash strobes. ISO 200 1/125sec F7.1

Non-diving and photography friends are great to keep you grounded. ‘How many mega-piglets are in that camera now, John?’, my dear friend Tony asked me one time. He was eyeing up my recently changed but strangely smaller camera than before. ‘It’s not so much the number of piglets, Tony; it’s how clean they are,’ I replied. Our common interest is in theatre and lighting, and I was photographing the dress rehearsal of a forthcoming production.

The camera was the Olympus OM-D E-M1, and it was 2014. It was the Japanese manufacturer’s best camera to date in the comparatively novel Micro Four Thirds format. This digital format was jointly developed with Panasonic a few years before, and this new flagship model was to offer a ‘professional’ option to photographers. I had used one of the very early cameras in this format – it was LCD only – and I could see its potential. If they could improve this system with a viable viewfinder and better image quality, they were onto a winner.

The first camera to offer this was the E-M5 model, first



*Fan Corals beneath rocky overhang, Raja Ampat, Indonesia.
OLYMPUS OM-D E-M1 Mark II in Nauticam NA-EM1ii housing, Olympus
M.Zuiko 8mm F1.8PRO lens, Zen 170mm dome, two x Retra Flash strobes. ISO
200 1/25sec F8.*

announced in 2012. The small form factor and a rapidly expanding lens choice made it instantly attractive to underwater photographers. Nauticam, followed by other manufacturers, quickly offered housings. They were enthusiastically taken up by divers keen to reduce their systems' bulk and weight without compromising image quality. I found this especially attractive, as I was shooting a Nikon

D2 series camera in a Subal housing. It was fabulous but enormous – and ridiculously heavy for travel.

These Micro Four Thirds or M4/3 were the first mirrorless systems available for underwater photography, and I was quickly converted. The press release for the NA-EM1 Nauticam housing in UWP magazine (issue 76), reads 'while this housing incorporates some of the best features



*Diver on rocky reef of Metridia anemones, Bream Rock, Old Head of Kinsale, Cork, Ireland.
OLYMPUS OM-D E-M1 in Nauticam NA-EM1 housing, Panasonic 8mm F3.5
lens, 4" dome, two x Inon z220 strobes. ISO 200 1/30sec F7.1.*

of the housing for the E-M5, the NA-EM1 is a new design, pushing the boundary further towards the ideal human-machine interface.' While the hyperbole does make you smile, this housing was genuinely innovative, well-engineered and highly ergonomic to use underwater. These smaller format cameras have many densely packed controls, which does present housing designers with a challenge.

In bringing their 'human-machine interface' to market, it needed to be easy-to-use above all else. They took many of the features of their DSLR housings, such as an integrated handle system, and it did result in a housing that is easy to hold, stable and easier to shoot. This was also the first housing that I used with the vacuum system and integrated electronic vacuum leak detection – and it certainly gives peace

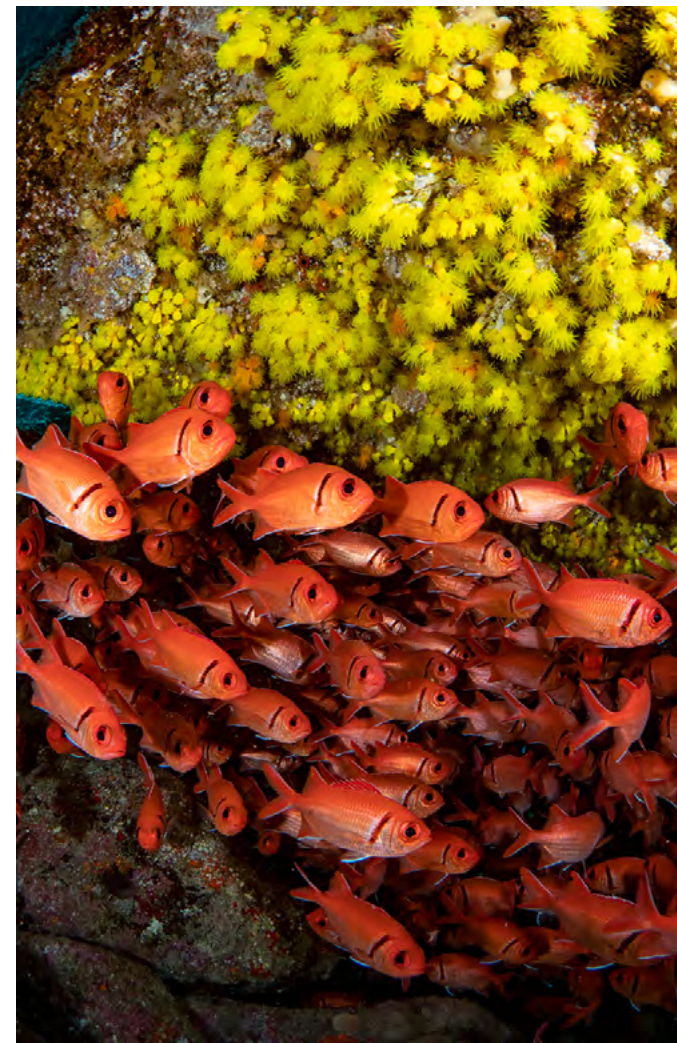


***Prawn close-up, Bullens Bay, Old Head of Kinsale.
Olympus OM-D E-M1 in Nauticam NA-EM1 housing, Panasonic-Leica 45mm Macro lens, two x Inon z220
strobes. ISO 200 1/60sec F7.1.***

of mind. I consider this option essential in any housing now.

A second significant change for me in this system was moving to fibre-optic fired flash. Having used the Nikonos five-pin electrical cables since 1985, I had had my share of failures along the way.

The new fibre optic wet connectors eliminated these issues and gave a reliable and straightforward setup that only added to my micro 4/3 rig. I first used the system diving here at home in Ireland with a 45mm macro lens and an 8mm fisheye lens with a small dome port – the entire setup easily fitting in a



***Atlantic bigeyes shelter under a covered rock face,
Mindelo, Sao Vicente, Cape Verde islands.
Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II in Nauticam NA-EM1ii housing, Olympus M-Zuiko 8mm F1.8PRO
lens, Zen Underwater 170mm Dome port, two x Retra
Flash strobes. ISO 320 1/125sec F7.1***

shoulder bag. The image quality was certainly there, although the Panasonic fisheye lens had a little more distortion than the 10.5mm Nikon that I was used



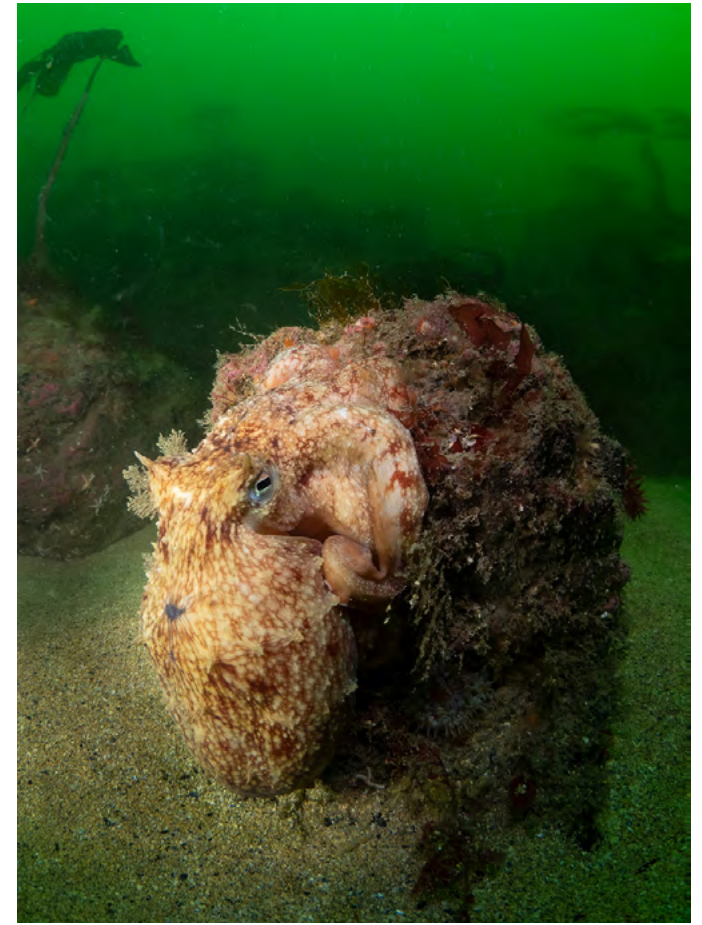
***A Sperm whale (Physeter macrocephalus) in the deep blue waters off Pico island, the Azores.
Olympus OM-D E-M1 in Nauticam NA-EM1 housing, Olympus M.Zuiko 8mm F1.8PRO lens, 170mm Zen
dome, no strobes. ISO 200 1/250sec F3.5***

to. But there was no going back. I decided to sell my Nikon and Subal outfit and expand the micro 4/3 system.

Did I find other shortcomings along the way? Yes, I felt the only area that was still a little weak was autofocus, especially underwater in low-contrast, wide-angle situations. When Olympus announced the Mark II version of the E-M1 camera

in 2016, I did raise an eyebrow and say to myself; this could be good. I bought the camera as soon as it was available in early 2017 and used it alongside a full-frame system on a landscape photography trip to the USA.

I wrote a lengthy review of my experience of using this camera at the time, and again, its compact size and weight (mainly when hiking) were a huge



Octopus, Bream Rock, Old Head of Kinsale, Cork, Ireland.

Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II in Nauticam NA-EM1ii housing, Olympus M-Zuiko 8mm F1.8PRO lens, Zen Underwater 170mm Dome port, two x Retra Flash strobes. ISO 500 1/30sec F7.1

attraction. Olympus had improved almost every aspect of the camera in this second model. I decided to upgrade the housing, and this is what I use today. While there is now a Mark III version available, that has other notable improvements, but many are not



*Barrel Jellyfish, Old Head of Kinsale, Cork, Ireland.
OLYMPUS OM-D E-M1 in Nauticam NA-EM1 housing, Panasonic 8mm F3.5 lens, 4" dome, two x Inon z220 strobes. ISO 250 1/250sec F10.*

particularly useful to the underwater photographer. Further refinements that have made this my chosen system are water contact optics and professional-grade lenses.

My system now consists of a 60mm macro lens; a 12-32mm versatile zoom lens (for use with the WWL-C lens from Nauticam); an 8mm F1.8 fisheye lens behind a Zen

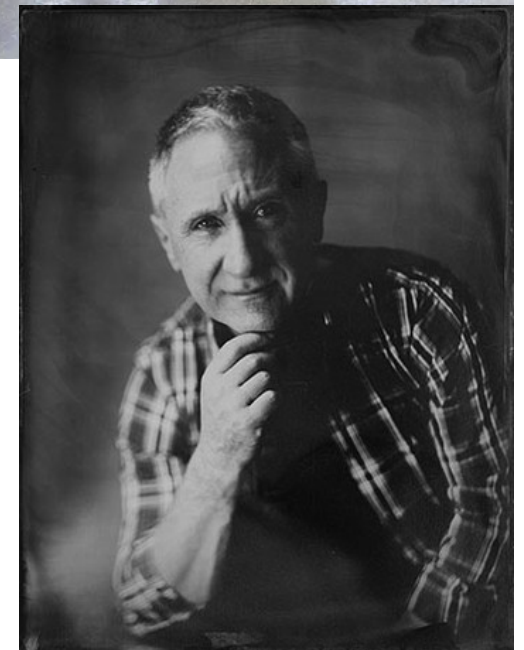
170mm glass dome; and a fibre-optic trigger for flash. Any photographs I cannot get with this system are not down to the operator rather than the instrument and optics.

As the dress rehearsal drew to a close, I shot several dozen photographs from different angles and under different lighting. I showed Tony some of the images on the LCD

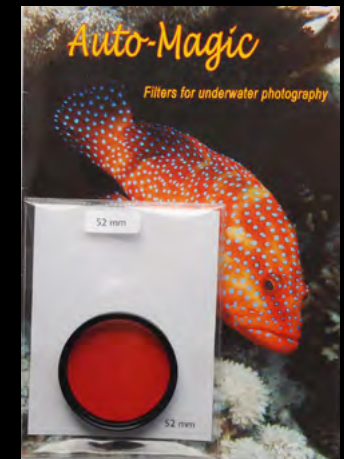


screen on the back of the camera - 'hmmm, not bad, he said, 'those piglets are spotless'. I decided not to enlighten him on the human-machine interface.

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