

Sea & Sea YS-D3 duo

by Dan Bolt

Loki, the god of mischief (if you believe in such things), was hard at work recently it would seem. Not only did the new Sea & Sea YS-D3 duo land on my doorstep just days before my Aquatica housing was being sent off for a service (first time in 5 years, I thought I better had), but he also threw a severe winter storm at the Highlands of Scotland when I was due up there to shoot for this article.

So I'll preface this review with an apology for the old tech, and somewhat lack-lustre images... but I had to take what I was given: a borrowed, ageing Olympus EPL7 in Olympus housing (circa 2014), and three days shore diving in poor vis.

The Sea & Sea YS-D3 duo has been released in addition to existing YS range of strobes and is not touted as a replacement for the YS-D3 MKII. Rather it's an augmented version of the current D3 that now supports OM Systems (previously Olympus) "RC mode" for TTL flash control.

RC mode is a control mechanism where the camera talks to the flash unit via a series of super-fast optical bursts to achieve optimum exposure. So just to be clear, this is only relevant

to OM Systems cameras (or old Olympus bodies) that have RC mode, and will only work with a receiving unit/strobe that can send/receive these optical signals.

RC mode has been around for many years but has had limited support in the underwater photography world. It's an encouraging sign that OM Systems is still relevant after they took over from Olympus that both Backscatter (with their MF-2 mini-flash) and Sea & Sea have decided to bring out new units with support for this automatic TTL protocol.

Setting up the camera and strobe to use RC mode is as simple as switching to it in the Menu on the camera, and turning the mode dial on the back of the D3 duo. You can also adjust the "automatic" output by as much as + or - 2 stops via the power dial on the strobe too.

I have to admit that I've never really had any success over the past 25 years with underwater TTL strobes; having tried earlier Sea & Sea models as well as ones from Inon and Epique (remember those?). So, imagine my surprise when I took the YS-D3 duo to

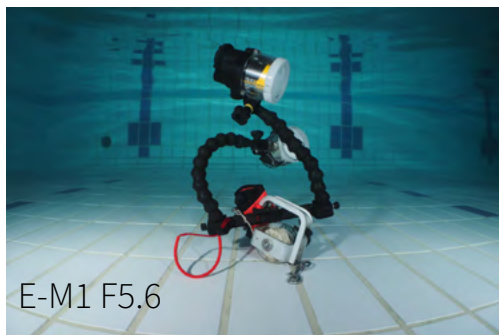


the pool that my diving club uses and took a series of test shots that all came out consistently well exposed... this actually works!

I only had one chance to use my OM-D EM-1 mk I before the housing was sent off for its service, so borrowing my buddy's old EPL7 I tried again the following week and got the same set of constant results, even with this old kit.

Pools are not the easiest





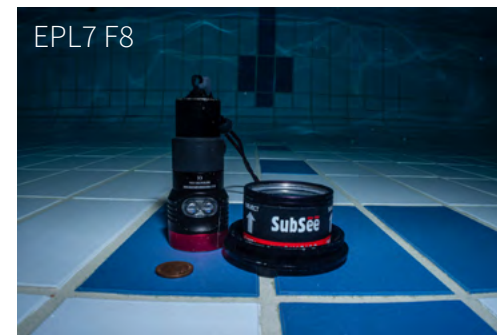
E-M1 F5.6



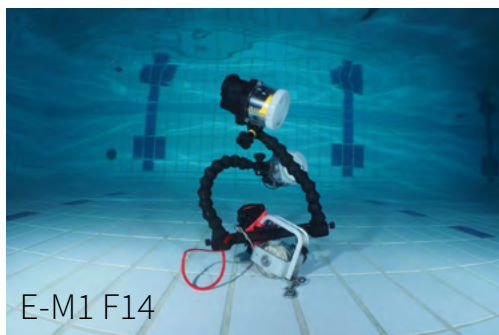
E-M1 F9



EPL7 F5.6



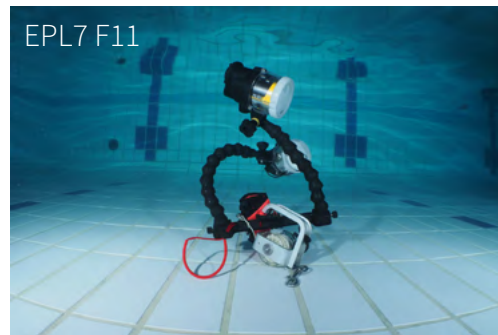
EPL7 F8



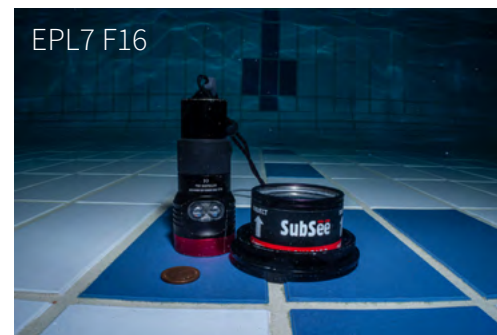
E-M1 F14



E-M1 F22



EPL7 F11



EPL7 F16

locations to expose as you have white, reflective tiles and actually quite low ambient light levels (well, this indoor pool in the UK in winter does anyway). So exposing the scene I set up consistently across the aperture range is a valid, and successful, test for the RC system.

The OM-D E-M1 seems to have got the exposure spot on, with the EPL7 under exposing a fraction. I should add that in all of the shots (apart from the power adjustment series) the power mode on the YS d3 duo was set to "N" – so no in-strobe power adjustment +/-.

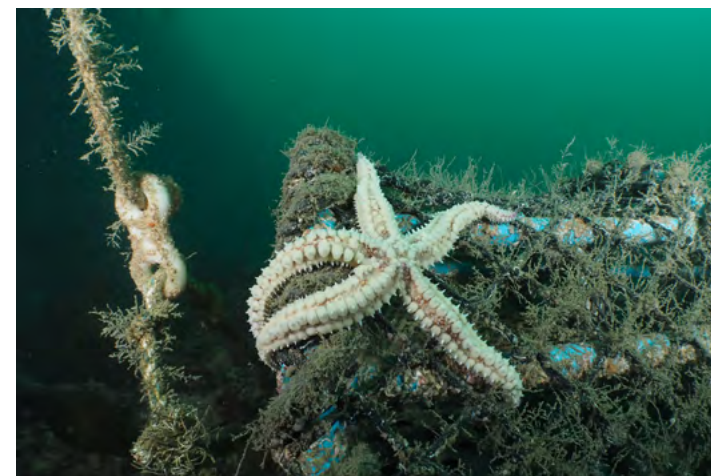
In the open water the EPL7 seemed to continue this slight under

exposure, but was consistent across all the shooting conditions and in-camera settings I threw at it.

I married the EPL7 with the Nauticam WWL-1 wet lens and a Subsee +10 dioptre so I could shoot both wide and close up photos on the same dive.

Dive 1 was a fairly dark affair, dropping down to 16m in 3-4m vis meant there wasn't a huge amount of daylight down there, but I varied my settings to try to introduce ambient light where appropriate, and also tried some fish portraiture (not too easy with a slow EPL7 in low light). The RC Mode is pretty impressive out in the field I must admit.

I did get the occasional strobe mis-fire throughout the dive; I'd say about 10% of my shots suffered this happening. It was strange, first one strobe wouldn't fire, then the other, sometimes both, and without changing anything they'd then just work again. I could see that a signal had gotten through to it from the camera (the status lamp changes colour on the back-panel) but I couldn't figure what was happening. I tried swapping fibre-



Dive 1 - Starfish on lobster pot. Olympus EPL 7, Olympus housing, Olympus EZ 14-42mm @14mm, 1/60th, ISO400, f/8. Nauticam WWL-1.



Dive 2 - Old lobster, misfire on left strobe. Olympus EPL 7, Olympus housing, Olympus EZ 14-42mm @22mm, 1/125th, ISO320, f/10. Nauticam WWL-1.

optic cables, checked for air bubbles on the cable mounts but it didn't seem consistent. Maybe light was leaking into the clear plastic housing and messing with the communication between camera and strobe? Or perhaps my (auto off) spotting light was confusing matters?

I'd love to get my OM-D EM-1 back and give these strobes a second try with that camera. Maybe I can get hold of an OM-1 too to try that in the next few weeks and write an updated report for UWP.

Dive 2 was similar, consistently great exposure on macro and wide

images. But again around a 10% mis-fire rate too.

Dive 3 was a few days later and with different batteries, new fibre optic cables, the housing covered in black tape and no spotting light I was still getting the occasional mis-fire. Though this time it was noticeably less frequent.

I'm not going to be put off by this, I suspect it's the age of the camera (the protocol has doubtless been updated since 2014!) that's the issue rather than the strobes or the RC System as a whole. The shots I was getting, in all conditions and exposure



Juvenile bib. Olympus EPL 7, Olympus housing, Olympus EZ 14-42mm @23mm, 1/80th, ISO400, f/10. Nauticam WWL-1.

settings, were great and I thoroughly enjoyed using these strobes (though the first thing I did was to turn off the audible beep it made after every shot!).

Any TTL system isn't a panacea for good lighting; you still need to have proper strobe positioning to avoid backscatter, but what this implementation does give you is ultimate control and flexibility by wrapping up manual, DS-TTL and RC Mode into a powerful, quick and

comprehensive unit.

If you're an Olympus or OM shooter, this is definitely an upgrade to consider and will add a very versatile tool to your kit. I'm hoping I can keep hold of my loaner units for a few more weeks... If I can, expect an update soon.

Dan Bolt

www.underwaterpics.co.uk