Olympus E-300 digital SLR and housing

by Charles Hood

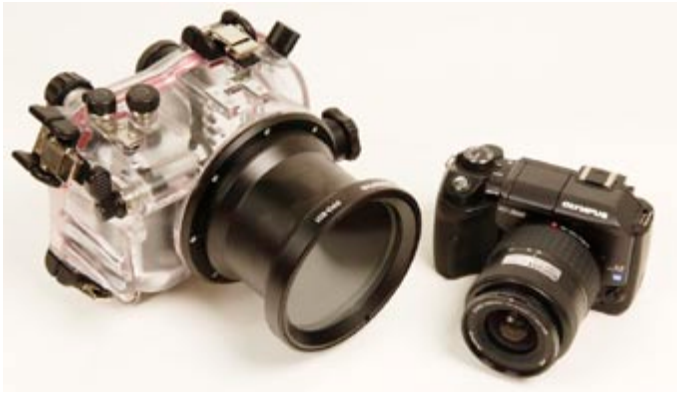
One of the issues when testing digital cameras is by the time I have had one for a sufficient number of months to make a detailed report they have been superseded. The E-300 from Olympus falls into this category and is now being phased out for the E-500.

However, there isn't yet an underwater housing for the E-500. Moreover, the E-300 is still available and the street price has dropped considerably so there are huge bargains to be had for what is now a relatively good value system. A quick search on Google revealed the camera and lens kit listed above being offered for under £400 and I suspect the housing will also attract similar offers.

The E-300 is Olympus's second stab at a digital SLR (single lens reflex) and the good news is that they made an underwater housing to go with it. To date Olympus have dominated the 'point and shoot' underwater market but have had no offering in the semi-professional range. Specification wise how does it compare to its competitors?

At eight million pixels it stacks up well against its rivals from Nikon and Canon in this price category. When it comes to the functions the E-300 follows the similar menu format found on their compact range so anyone who is familiar with these will get to grips with the SLR fairly quickly.

You get the usual array of far-too-many automatic features, however, I like many other underwater photographers choose to shoot in manual mode underwater which this camera allows you to do with ease. There is a built in light meter that is displayed on the screen at the back making it



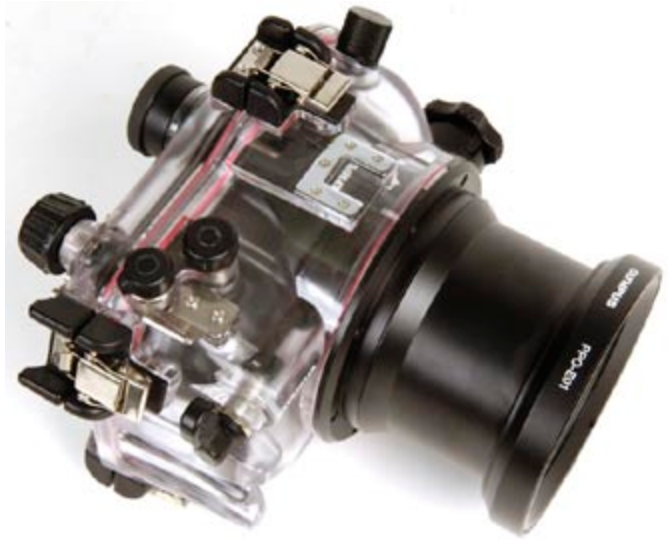
easy to judge your exposure although I would have also preferred it to be displayed in the viewfinder as well.

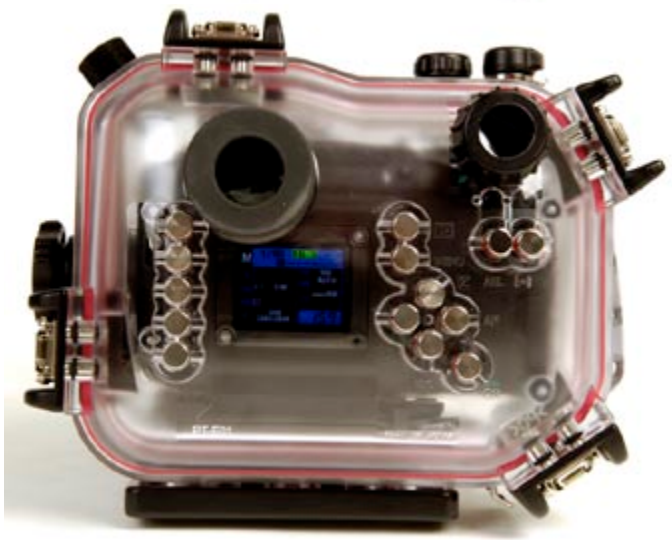
The greatest advantage this camera has over the compact cameras is that the shutter delay is almost negligible. Thus when you press the shutter it takes the picture about 1/10s later compared to anything up to two seconds with a 'point and shoot'.

The bad news is that, after taking four shots, the buffer fills up and takes quite a while to clear. You may expect this when in RAW mode but I found it also happened when shooting in best jpeg.

Olympus manufacturers a good range of lenses and I chose the 14-45mm zoom, which I thought would be a good all rounder for underwater use. I found it a bit slow at f3.5-f5.6 but considering its price tag its on par with similar offerings in the market. There is also a wider 11-22mm zoom, 8mm Fisheye and 50 macro lens available.

The housing is made from transparent polycarbonate similar in design to the consumer casings only bigger and with more controls. The





screw threaded port supplied is machined out of aluminium and is of superb quality. The only draw back is that it is flat rather than domed. This means, due to defraction (the bending of light that takes place underwater between the water/air interface)

the 14-45mm becomes more like a 20-60mm. Or to put this in context similar to a 30-90mm lens when comparing it with 35mm film equivalent, which makes it nowhere near as attractive as I first thought.

Olympus have also chosen to use their own flash connection system rather than the industry standard five pin Nikonos style so my strobes wouldn't fit and I chose to shoot natural light.

What's it like to use? In a nutshell very much like any other housing. Its compact design fits in a gloved hand well and all functions can be easily used thanks to the large buttons, knobs and levers.

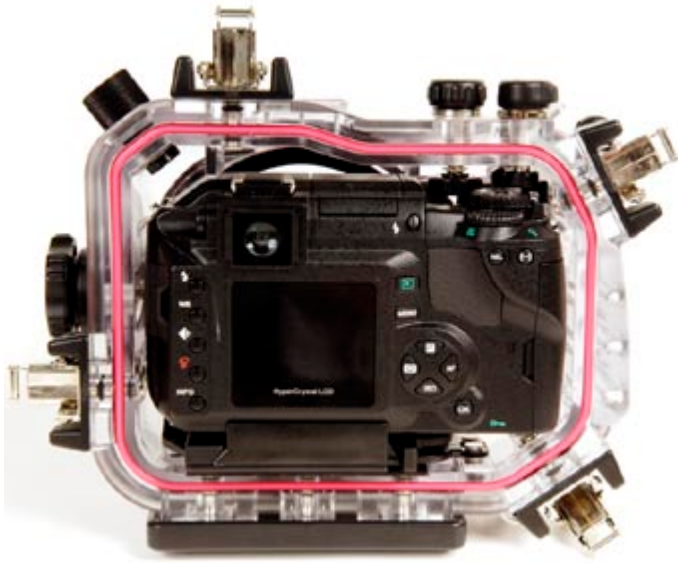
What particularly impressed me was the double O ring seal on the back plate that gives that extra bit of security against water ingress.

One criticism is that the optical viewfinder is quite small and I guess you only get around 70% viewing at best so framing is a bit hit and miss. The LCD viewing screen is 1.8" , slightly smaller than the Nikon D70s.

Back in the studio I found that the camera requires you to load the supplied software onto your computer in order to download the images. Not wishing to have yet another camera manufacturers software cluttering up my hard drive I chose to use a card reader and imported them without any problems from the compact flash.

The image quality is good. Not outstanding but on a par with my previously owned Nikon D100. So considering the price tag you get an excellent image for your money.

Who is this system aimed at? I would say it fills an important gap in between the consumer market and the semi professional market such as the Nikon D70 in an aluminium housing. The housing is rated to 60 metres. E-300 & 14-45mm lens kit £629.99 Housing £799.99 Port £249.99



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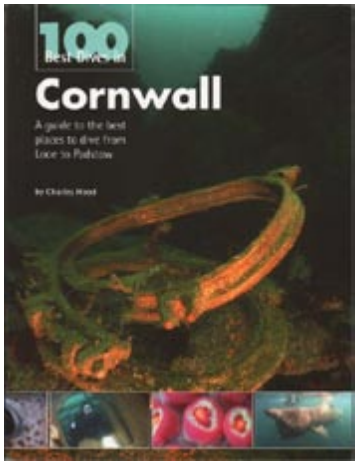

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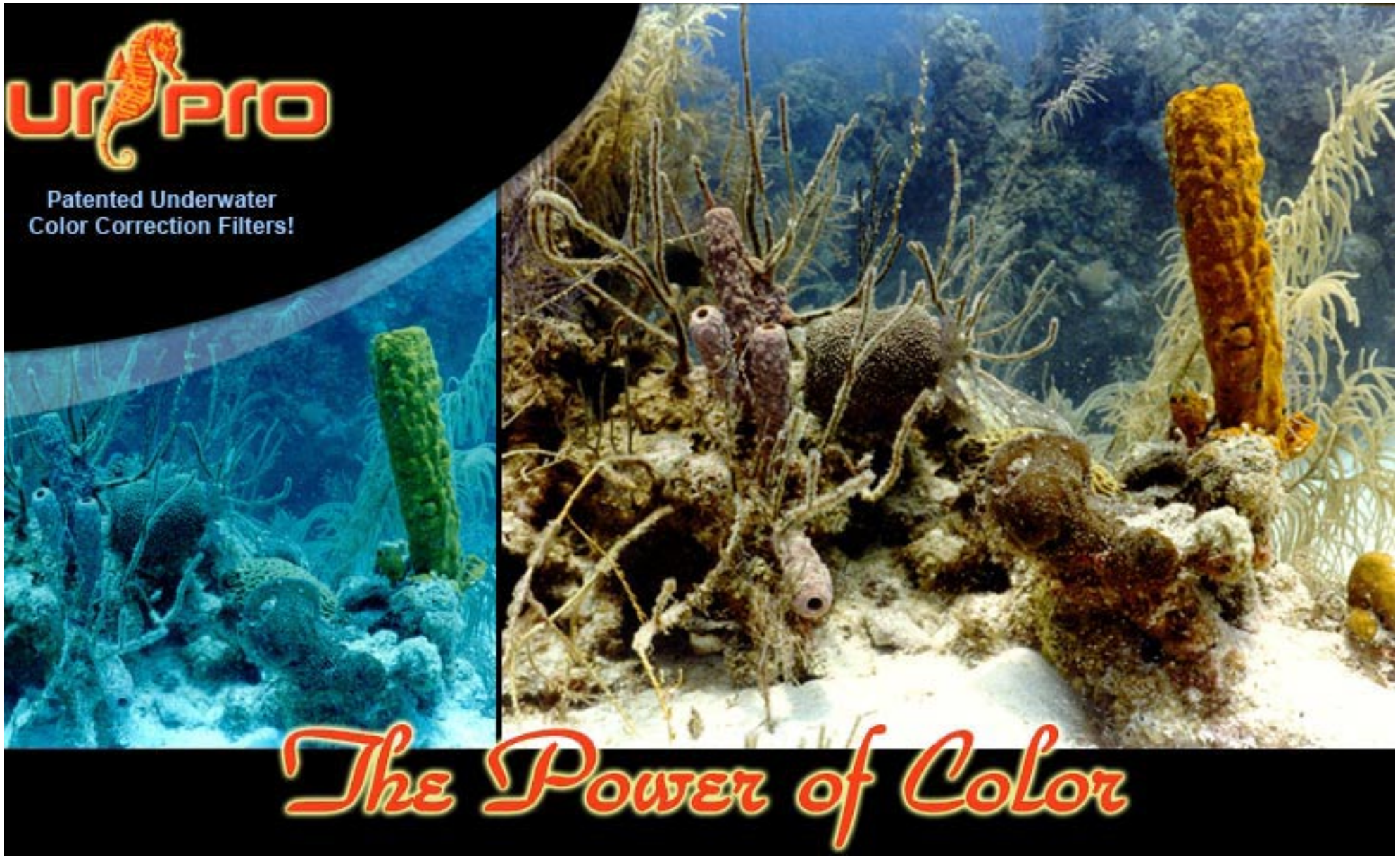

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