

Olympus Evolt E-330 SLR + 10Bar Housing Review

By Jeff Mullins

When Olympus released their latest Evolt E-330 7.5 megapixel Live-View digital SLR earlier this year. I knew that this camera was for me. I converted to digital back in 2003, after a lot of years taking underwater photographs utilising film SLR's.

My introduction to digital underwater photography was with the Olympus C-5050z coupled with a pair of Inon Z220 strobes and Inon accessory lenses. This set-up gave me the flexibility on photo shoots to cover almost any subject from 1:1 macro through fish portraiture to wide angle - all with one camera. Gone were the days of two housings, a couple of Nikonos cameras and a truck-load of strobes & lenses. To me it was a breath of fresh air.

I was diving armed with a 1Gb compact flash card and a 256Mb XD card and could take 170 Raw images without opening the camera! I could review images as I took them, add a close-up lens or two for additional magnification or screw-on a wide angle lens to capture broad scenes

- But just as importantly I could see my subjects on the LCD screen at arms length. No longer did I have to hold my camera up to my mask as I approached some elusive creature, only to find it had been scared-off by my close presence. With the camera at arms length, I could now sneak-up on creatures that had defied my approaches for years, even place the camera in small crevices and ledges where I just physically couldn't get myself, as it always seemed this was where my prey was hiding.

I'll admit, now and again I yearned for faster focus ability and cursed the shutter lag on more than one occasion, but the benefits of the Olympus C-5050z camera set-up, far outweighed the few criticisms I had.

At one stage I was lured by some advertising and foolishly visited a local camera store to look at digital SLR's, not knowing that these cameras didn't have a Live-View facility - the ability to see the image on an LCD screen before the shutter was depressed.

I should have carried out a bit



more research before my visit, as I felt a proper fool when I, (holding Nikon's latest SLR) asked the young digital genius behind the counter "How do you turn on the LCD screen to take a pic?" I was quietly ushered aside and shown the point & shoot range of cameras and told "These are what you need mate, they have LCD screens for viewing pics. SLR's only have a screen for viewing after the pic has been taken" - Well no-one told me! So it was back to the reliable Olympus C-5050z until something better came along - and gladly, now it has.

The Evolt E-330 through some

unique research by the Olympus team, now offers Live-View on a large LCD screen. The first of its kind in the SLR world. This along with a range of underwater housings to suit the camera becoming available in mid 2006, was the news I - and I'm sure - a lot of other Point & Shoot users, had been waiting for.

I chose a housing by Hong Kong based manufacturer 10Bar for my camera, I was swayed by the depth rating (90metres or 300') and standard Nikonos style sync socket. Also price and availability helped in the decision, plus 10Bar were very accommodating



in manufacturing a port for me that suits not only the standard 14-45mm zoom lens, but also the 50mm & 35mm macro lenses - which I am sure will be popular with many other photographers.

While 10Bar prepared my new port, I busily familiarised myself with the Olympus E-330 camera's controls above water.

The Camera

I found the E-330 menu's easy to access, particularly the major functions like ISO speeds, F stops, shutter speeds, aperture, quality settings, memory card selection, metering, flash mode/output and exposure compensation. Most of these functions are available as one-touch to access the menu, then rotate the main dial to select the desired setting.

The E-330 has two memory card slots, one for compact flash cards and the other XD cards. This allows the use of two cards to be used alongside one another, giving the photographer a

huge memory capability (a nice bonus for underwater use). Card selection is very quick and easy from the one-touch menu's.

The large 2.5" LCD (215,250 pixels) is very easy to view from almost any angle and has nice clear/bright natural colours. It swivels out to various angles (above water) for overhead or waste level shooting.

The Live-View function has two modes, namely A & B – not too hard to remember! A Mode is a standard Live-View, all functions of the camera work including Auto Focus. The one small downfall is the LCD only displays 92% of the actual image being photographed. This is due to the technical restraints of the optics required to achieve Live-View. But in practice I found this to not be a handicap at all and quickly became accustomed to allowing for the additional 8% of coverage that was not viewable in the LCD. A Mode is what most underwater photographers are going to use.

***Soft Coral Goby – Tulamben, Bali.
Olympus E-330 , ISO 100, 1/125th @
F16, manual exposure, 50mm macro
lens, 2x Inon Z220 strobes @ full power
with -.5 diffusers.***

B Mode by comparison, shows 100% of the image being photographed on the LCD. The mirror is locked-up in this mode and there is a slight delay in shutter release. Currently out-of-the-box the E-330 has no autofocus in B Mode – only manual focusing, but at the time of writing Olympus have released a firmware upgrade that enables autofocus by pressing the AEL/AFL button. It remains to be seen if this

mode is of any use underwater, mostly due to the shutter delay.

Like all SLR's, the E-330 also has a standard optical viewfinder that shows around 95% of the actual image being photographed. This can be closed when using the LCD screen in Live View mode, or left open at the risk of metering errors if ambient light enters the viewfinder. In practice I found the only application for the optical viewfinder was in very bright sunlit areas, where the LCD was lit by direct sunlight (above water). In this situation I had a better view of scene details and ability to check focus.

Olympus have also included their dust reduction system, this saves a lot of editing time later, removing dust from the final images with Photoshop. This has been a feature on all Olympus SLR's for some time now, a very nice feature that starts at every turn-on or can be executed manually.

On the negative side, one function I really liked on the Olympus C-5050z was not easy to access on the E-330. The My Mode function on the C-5050z gave me access to eight of my own settings that were easily re-called to take me quickly from extreme macro to medium telephoto through wide angle settings by pressing one button and rotating a dial. On the E-330 I only have two My Mode's, one of these is accessible by pre-programming a one-touch button

any time, but it needs to be held while depressing the shutter button. This might be OK above water, but underwater requires the use of two hands! The second My Mode is only accessible through the user menu's and takes quite a few button presses (and a good memory) to find. This is no big deal, but a few more easily accessible My Modes would have been a nice feature and very easily built-in at production.

Lenses

In use I found the standard 14-45mm kit lens to be great for above water use, it focused fast and produced sharp images, I also added a 40-150mm telephoto zoom for above water photography and a



50mm macro for underwater use. There are also currently an 8mm, 35mm macro and a fast 14-54mm lenses available.

All of the above lenses are the Zuiko Four Thirds (4/3) system lenses, these lenses are specifically designed for the sensor size used in the 'E Series' Olympus digital SLR cameras and their focal lengths need to be doubled to give a comparison to the old 35mm SLR lenses – so for instance the Olympus Zuiko 50mm macro is equivalent to a 100mm macro lens on a film SLR, in terms of image area and angles of view. Of these lenses I found the 50mm macro to be the sharpest and also had a great ability to focus in dull lighting conditions. Sigma are also producing lenses to suit the Olympus mounts.

The LCD playback functions of the E-330 offers seven image detail options. The first three



Schooling Batfish – Amed, Bali. Olympus E-330, ISO 100, 1/125th @ F4.1, shutter priority, 14-45mm lens (23mm), natural light.

options give a full-screen size images with basic file number, quality and date functions. The fourth shows a smaller image on the LCD with the auto focus point, quality setting, four separate colour histogram graphs and detailed exposure information. The fifth is a full screen size image overlaid with a large histogram graph. The sixth & seventh are full screen size images with highlights and shadows flashing, these indicate potential over or under exposure in the image. Each of these playback screens have their applications and can be quickly scrolled through by pressing the Info button.

The camera produces nice JPG images, with various options for quality, colour and compression – plus it also produces RAW images with the option of an accompanying JPG image.

The Software

I shot RAW for my tests, but found the software that came with the camera too clumsy to use for RAW processing and opted to wait for



Lionfish – Amed, Bali. Olympus E-330, ISO 100, 1/125th @ F6.3, manual exposure, 14-45mm lens (45mm), 2x Inon Z220 strobes @ -2 power.

Adobe to release an updated camera RAW plug-in that supports the E-330 camera for Adobe Photoshop CS2. This was released at the end of June 2006 as a free download and works very well.

Housing Build & Functions

10Bar produced my port and housing in a couple of weeks and I was ready to get the camera wet (not) by the time it arrived. Manufactured from clear polycarbonate, the overall appearance of the housing was sturdy and well engineered. Two decent sized handles place the users hands in the correct position for easy use of most controls.

Controls are all double 'O' ring sealed and the rear access cover of the housing is easily removed using a small tool supplied with the housing. The sealing method of the rear cover is quite unique,



Pixie Hawkfish in Crinoid – Tulamben, Bali. Olympus E-330, ISO 100, 1/125th @ F22, manual exposure, 50mm macro lens, 2x Inon Z220 strobes @ -_power.

with no latches to hold it in place. 10Bar have developed an air lock system that utilises a single 'O' ring and a vent valve that is released when assembling and dismantling the housing. It works very simply and is easy to check the 'O' ring is sealing visually before entering the water. I really like the system and its simplicity.

The controls buttons are large and easy to press using gloved hands, there are controls to access all features of the camera except the optical viewfinder closing lever. Some controls are shared for two or more

functions, this is achieved by twisting the control to reach a near neighbor. At first I found this a bit cumbersome, particularly after using the Olympus PT-015 for the C-5050z as this had a button for each camera control. But it didn't take long for me to adjust to the new way of accessing controls. If individual push buttons were fitted for each control, the manufacturer would need to reduce the overall size of each button control as they would be crowded close together – this would detract from the build quality and



- 1.Shutter**
- 2.Exposure Compensation**
- 3.On/Off, Mode Dial**
- 4.Main Dial**
- 5.Live View, A/B**
- 6.AEL/AFL, Drive Mode**
- 7.OK**
- 8.WB, AF, ISO, Metering Mode**
- 9.Play, Delete**
- 10.MENU, INFO**
- 11.Zoom**

strength of those currently fitted.

There are two strobe mounting shoes, one on the top of each handle. An anodised alloy base-plate comes standard with the housing with nice sturdy stainless steel fittings. Various strobe mounts are available from 10Bar to suit different strobe arms, plus they also have their own flexible strobe arms and brackets. I chose to use my existing Inon Z220 strobes fitted with Locline arms as I was comfortable with them and understood the strobes capabilities.



10Bar provided a pair of adaptors that my arms bolted directly too for a very reasonable price. I fitted a Sea & Sea sync cord with a Nikons 'T' connector, that plugs directly into the 10Bar housing's bulkhead.

I don't use TTL flash underwater, but from what I understand Olympus cameras have their own TTL circuitry that only works with Olympus flashes so I don't think this camera/housing combination will provide TTL functions to the popular brands of underwater strobes. But for my

purposes I am happy to control my exposures manually. (Incidentally 10Bar do manufacture a housing for the FL-50 flash that offers full TTL functions underwater, these are available as a kit with the housing).

The standard anodised aluminium port excepts the 14-45mm standard zoom lens, but a little extra gets a port capable of fitting the 35mm macro & 50mm macro lenses. I opted for this port as I want to use the 35mm and 50mm macro lenses most of the time. 10Bar also manufacture an extension to allow use of the Olympus extension tube for greater magnification. They also supply (as an option) a slip-on port shade for use with the 50mm macro lens, to prevent internal reflections between the port and lens. I ordered this part but so far haven't needed it, as I think this would only be a problem in bright shallow, back-lit scenes (not a normal macro situation).

One negative on the housing exterior was a mould-release mark on the rear cover. This mark is significant and is located over the top right-hand side of the LCD when the camera is installed in the housing. Admittedly underwater I didn't notice it, but if it was located somewhere else on the rear cover it would be much better. 10Bar have indicated that they will be moving the position of the mould release, but this will not be an



Blue Ribbon Eel – Tulamben, Bali. Olympus E-330, ISO 100, 1/160th @ F22, manual exposure, 50mm macro lens, 2x Inon Z220 strobes @ - power.

immediate change.

Assembling Camera/Housing

Fitting the E-330 camera to the 10Bar housing was very-very simple, so simple in fact that I did it without instructions as my housing was built before instructions were written. The camera fits to a base plate that slides onto a track in the base of the housing, the function dial control button is

lifted and the base plate slides into the housing, then the spring-loaded dial control is lowered onto the camera. Fit the strobe hotshoe to the camera and then fit the rear of the housing to the main body and away you go! I am more than impressed with the ease of assembly. If the zoom lens is fitted it needs a strap attached to the lens before assembly and this needs to line-up with a pair of nylon 'lugs' in the port, but this is also very simple.

Beneath the Sea

Armed with the standard kit lens (14-45mm zoom) I headed off to see how it all works underwater. Overall feel was nice, buoyancy was perfect with my two strobes fitted – just very slightly negative. I left the optical viewfinder open (as this can't be controlled underwater), as I had heard that the LCD screen was difficult to focus with. Well let me tell you, I have only looked through the viewfinder once and was quickly reminded of my old film SLR days - So quickly reverted to the LCD screen which is just great – bright, clear and easy to focus with.

Admittedly the 14-45mm lens is not a fantastic lens for underwater use, it doesn't focus particularly close (approximately 50cm is closest focus with lens at 45mm) and it is a reasonably 'slow' lens with maximum apertures of F3.5 at 14mm to F5.6 at 45mm. So focus is a little slow in dull conditions, I only experienced no focus at 36 metres in heavily overcast conditions. But being a zoom lens it is very versatile and may suit a lot of photographers. Olympus also produce a faster 14-54mm F2.8-3.5 zoom lens.

I used the camera in Live-Mode A and had no problems with battery life. After filling a 1Gb compact flash card and a 256Mb XD card with test images on one dive, the camera took

a lot of above water shots on the same battery. I have since used the 50mm macro lens in the housing. This lens is a joy to use, with fast focus and much better low light focusing ability than the 14-45mm (being an F2.0 lens helps) with very sharp detail in the images.

Conclusion

If you want a camera/housing combination that has Live View and is more capable than all of the Point & Shoot cameras available, then this set-up is both affordable (compared to many SLR set-up's) and has very few negative aspects. It is a great stepping stone for those photographers wanting more than their point & shoot cameras can offer.

Jeff Mullins

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*Reef
Wreck &
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A close-up photograph of a colorful crab, likely a coconut crab, on a reef. The crab has a blue and white patterned body with orange and red accents. It is holding a green, leaf-like object in its pincers.

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A detailed view of the AQUATICA A200 camera housing. It is a silver, rectangular device with a large black lens on the right side. Various controls like buttons and dials are visible on the top and left. The brand name 'AQUATICA' is printed on the top right, and 'A 200 DIGITAL PRO HOUSING' is on the bottom right.

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